

«Come and see»
(Jn 1,39)

THE NEED FOR VOCATION MINISTRY

Strenna 2011'

PREMISS: Some significant events in the second half of 2010 — COMMENTARY ON THE STRENNA 2011:

1. Returning to Don Bosco. How did Don Bosco carry out this task of promoting vocations? — 2. A prior need: to create and develop a vocational culture. *Life is vocation - Open to God and to others - Lived as a gift and as a task.* — 3. Aspects which have a special significance in vocational animation and proposal. Promoting a vocational culture: the essential task of Youth Ministry. - Education to love, to chastity. - Education to prayer - Personal accompaniment. - The centrality and the role of religious consecration in the mission of the Salesian Family. - The Salesian Youth Movement, a special place for vocations. — 4. Conclusion. The beauty and the relevance of the Salesian vocation. - The caravan In the desert. - *The dance of life.*

Rome, 25 December 2010
Solemnity of the Birth of the Lord

My Dear Confreres,

Wherever you may be, may my greetings bring you my very best wishes for a beautiful, joyful and fruitful celebration of the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God. Obviously it is not a mere declaration of faith with nothing to do with our life. On the contrary, this confession of faith becomes the revelation of the mystery of the human being and therefore a plan of life. In fact He became man, fully like us, sharing our poor human condition in everything, sin excepted, so that we might become children of God. He did not come to consecrate our human nature, but to transform it from within, and to make it new by taking it fully upon himself. This is our vocation: to reproduce his image faithfully in ourselves (cf. *Rom 8, 29*), and also our mission: «we educate and evangelize according to a plan for the total well-being of man directed to Christ, the perfect man» (C. 31).

Since my last letter, you can find accounts of the activities undertaken in these months by reading the chronicle of the Rector Major, even though ANS offers a regular service regarding all my travels, visits, commitments and addresses. Nevertheless I think it opportune to mention some of the more significant events and/or celebrations.

First of all, the Extraordinary Visitation to the Delegation of Malta, at the beginning of September, while my Vicar was visiting Ireland, was an opportunity to have a fresh experience of being close to the communities, not for some celebration or anniversary, but to get to know the Salesian presences, the contexts in which they find themselves as they live their Salesian life and carry out their mission, the challenges they face and the projects they are working on. Usually in the Congregation the Extraordinary Visitations are made by the Regional Councillor or by other visitors according to art. 104 of the Regulations which states: «Personally or through others the Rector Major may visit each and every Province and local community whenever the need arises.. I think that for the confreres the visit was a breath of fresh air and for me a real grace.

The World Assembly of the Past Pupils, at the end of September and the beginning of October, took place in an atmosphere of great serenity and responsibility. Once again I was able to realise the great energy we have available to us in this Association, but from which we have so far scarcely managed to profit. I think we are wasting a potential which could be of great importance if we can help the Past Pupils to move on from simple anecdotes about their being pupils in a Salesian school to realising the gift of a Salesian education and therefore to their commitment to bringing to their families and to society the wealth of the values learned and working as real Federations and Confederation with clear and effective projects. Here we as a Congregation have a challenge we need to take up.

Nevertheless, in my opinion, the most important event we have celebrated in this period was the International Congress "Don Rua in History", at which there was a marvellous world-wide representation of the Provinces of the whole Congregation, the distinguished presence of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians and some other members of the Salesian Family. As well as the Congress organised a year ago by ACSSA (Salesian Historical Association), this International Congress gave us as its most precious fruit an image of Don Rua that was full of insights and I would say quite novel. From now on it will no longer be

possible to continue to use the classic cliché describing him as "the living Rule" or "another Don Bosco", but he will have to be studied, in the knowledge that he represents the stage in the history of the Congregation which is the most significant, that is to say that of transition after the death of Don Bosco the founder. While I express the hope that the Provinces will organise their own Provincial Congresses or Seminars on the subject, I invite all of you to read and study the texts of the two Congresses which have already been collected together. It will be the best way of setting in motion the preparations for the bicentenary of the birth of Don Bosco.

Then I cannot fail to recall the meeting of all the Provincials of Europe, gathered in Rome between 26 and 28 November, to continue their reflections - already set in motion in the two previous meetings - on the "Project for Europe". This Project is intended to bring about the re-vitalisation from within of the charism in Europe; to launch and consolidate the process of giving fresh significance to, re-locating and reorganising the Salesian presences in this continent; to take up the commitments of the new evangelisation of Europe, also by sending "missionaries" who will come from all parts of the Congregation. This third meeting of the Provincials of Europe has helped to clarify better and give concrete form to the objectives to be achieved in the two year period 2011-2012.

Finally, before presenting to you the Strenna for 2011, I remind you that Fr Marek Chrzan was appointed Councillor for the North Europe Region following the resignation on health grounds of Fr Stefan Turanski, to whom I publicly renew my gratitude for the generous service undertaken in the two and a half years following his election. In addition, I appointed as Postulator for the Causes of Beatification and Canonisation Fr Pier Luigi Cameroni in place of Fr Enrico dal Covolo, who was appointed by the Holy Father Rector Magnificus of the Pontifical Lateran University and then ordained Bishop.

And now I proceed to present to you the Strenna for 2011. I do so certain that I shall be offering you a welcome gift both on account of the value which the *Strenna* in itself has in our Salesian tradition from Don Bosco's times, and also on account of the subject chosen which concerns our life and our mission. I invite you to help young people make the discovery that life is vocation, and in more practical terms help them bring to maturity apostolic life-plans through their education in the faith, taking their place in the Church, listening to the Word, prayer, participation in sacramental life, spiritual accompaniment and initiation in apostolic work.

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«*Come and see*»

(*Jn 1,39*)

The need for vocation ministry

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,
members of the whole Salesian Family and friends of Don Bosco,

I greet you with the great affection and esteem I have for each one of you, wishing you a New Year full of the blessings the Father wanted to give us in the incarnation of his Son.

I am writing to you to present the Strenna for 2011, certain that it will be a welcome gift both for the value which the *Strenna* as such has had in our Salesian tradition since Don Bosco's day, and because of the topic chosen which affects our life, our mission and our ability to help in discovering that life is vocation, also because of the times in which we are living as the Church and the Salesian Family, especially in the West.

After the Strenna for 2010, "*Lord, we want to see Jesus*", about the urgent need to evangelise, the most logical and natural thing, it seemed to me, was to make a heartfelt appeal to the whole Salesian Family to feel with us SDB, the need for vocation ministry. In fact, we Salesians

"feel more strongly than ever the challenge of creating a vocational culture in every setting, such that young people may discover life as a call and that all Salesian ministry may be truly vocational. This requires that we help young people overcome an individualist mindset and the culture of self-fulfilment which urges them to plan their future without heeding God; it also

requires us to involve and form families and lay people. There has to be a particular effort put into engendering apostolic passion amongst the young. Like Don Bosco we are called to encourage them to be apostles among their own companions, taking on various kinds of ecclesial and social service, being involved in missionary projects. To encourage a vocational option for apostolic commitment, these young people should be offered a more intensive spiritual life and a more personal and systematic accompaniment. This is fertile ground where families capable of authentic witness can flourish, as well as committed lay people at every level of Church and society. Vocations to consecrated life and to ministry can also flourish".'

Evangelisation and vocation, dear brothers and sisters, are two inseparable elements. Indeed, the criterion for the authenticity of a good evangelisation is its capacity to give rise to vocations, to bring to maturity evangelical life plans, to involve the whole person of those who are being evangelised, to the point of making them disciples and apostles.

¹ GC26, *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*, Rome, 2008, n. 53: "Apostolic Vocations",

An historical fact in the life of Jesus, confirmed by all four evangelists, is that from the beginning of his evangelising activity (cf. *Mk* 1,14-15), Jesus called some to follow him (cf. *Mk* 1,16-20; *Mt* 4,18-19; *Lk* 5,10-11; *Jn* 1,35-39). In this way, these first disciples of his became "companions throughout the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out amongst us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day he was taken up from us" (*Act* 1,21-22).

The vocation of these first disciples according to the Gospel of John was the result of a personal meeting which evoked in them an attraction, a fascination which changed their minds and especially their hearts, as they recognised in Jesus the One in whom were being fulfilled the deepest expectations, the prophecies, the awaited Messiah. This experience tied them so closely to the person of Jesus that they followed him enthusiastically and told others about their experience, inviting them to share in it, by meeting Jesus personally. St Luke's Gospel also speaks about the group of women who accompany and assist the Lord (cf. *Lk* 8,1-3) which means that Jesus had women among his disciples, some of whom were to be witnesses of his death and resurrection (cf. *Lk* 23,55-24,11.22).

Therefore, brothers and sisters, I am inviting you to be for young people real spiritual guides, like John the Baptist who pointed out Jesus to his disciples telling them: "Look there is the Lamb of God!" (*Jn* 1,36). In this way they followed after him so that Jesus becoming aware that some people were following him turned to them and asked them directly: "What do you want?" and they, taken with the desire to really know who this Jesus is, asked him: "Rabbi, where do you live?" (*Jn* 1,38). And He invited them as the first disciples, to have the experience of living with him: "Come and see". It was something extremely beautiful that they experienced from the moment in which "they went and saw where he lived, and stayed with him the rest of that day" (*Jn* 1,39).

There you have the first of the characteristics of the Christian vocation: a meeting, a personal friendly relationship which fills the heart and changes one's life. This transforming meeting is the faith, which animated by love, makes believers and the Christian communities into those who spread the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus. St Paul in his letter to the community in Thessalonica puts it this way: "You received the word... you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia; by your means the Word of the Lord has gone forth everywhere" (cf. *1 Ts* 1,7-8). We are called therefore to renew in ourselves this vocational dynamic: to communicate and to share the enthusiasm and the passion with which we are living our vocation, in such a way that our life itself becomes the proposal of a vocation for others. Just as Don Bosco did, who rather than using vocation campaigns knew how to create at Valdocco a microclimate in which vocations grew and matured, creating an authentic vocational culture in which life is understood and lived as a gift, as a vocation and as a mission, within a diversity of options.

1. Returning to Don Bosco

Invited to start afresh from Don Bosco in order to understand ever better and to put into practice with greater fidelity the passion which burned in his heart and urged him to seek the glory of God and the salvation of souls, let us imitate him in his untiring labours to foster vocations in the service of the

Church, the most precious fruit of his work of education and evangelisation, the human and Christian formation of the young. His experience and his criteria and attitudes can throw light on and guide our commitment to vocations.

"Don Bosco, while working with tireless generosity in fostering many kinds of vocation in the Church, also called young men to stay with him permanently. For us too, proposing the Salesian consecrated vocation to young people is part of our fidelity to God for the gift we have received. It is what drives our desire to share the joy of following the Lord Jesus, staying with Don Bosco, in order to give hope to many other young people of the whole world".²

Don Bosco lived, let us not forget, *in a climate which was hardly encouraging* and in some ways was opposed to the fostering of ecclesiastical vocations. The Kingdom of Sardinia with its new constitution, and the subsequent freedom of the press, of conscience, of worship and the potential "laicisation" of the State, had resulted in a growing opposition to the Church. Freedom of worship and the active Protestant propaganda had disturbed the ordinary simple people, projecting a negative image of the Church, of the Pope, bishops and priests. This had created among the people, and especially among the young, an atmosphere of nationalism filled with liberal and anti-clerical ideas.

Don Bosco himself referring to those times wrote: "a frenzied spirit developed against the religious orders, the ecclesiastical Congregations; and then in general against the clergy and all the authorities of the Church. This scornful outcry against religion had the consequence of distancing young people from moral behaviour, from piety; hence from a vocation to the ecclesiastical state. Therefore no religious vocations and almost none for the ecclesiastical state. While the religious institutes were gradually being dispersed, the priests were held in contempt, some put in prison, others sent into forced exile, how ever could it be possible, humanly speaking, to cultivate the spirit of vocations?"

GC26, *Da mihi animas, cetera toile*, Rome, 2008, n. 54: "Accompaniment of candidates to Salesian consecrated life".
Cenno storico sulla Congregazione di S. Francesco di Sales e relativi schiarimenti. Roma, Tip. Poliglotta 1874. In OE XXV, p. 233.

But notice, my brothers and sisters, how Don Bosco responds. He does not waste time complaining but immediately sets to work to gather together and to cultivate vocations and to promote the formation of the young men left without their seminary, looking after the good-natured boys and directing them towards an ecclesiastical career. In the Oratory, together with the young workers, orphans, Don Bosco very quickly gathered together good spirited boys and young men who gave signs of an inclination for the priesthood and religious life. He carefully devoted himself as a priority in their formation, to an active and practical formation with personal accompaniment in an atmosphere with a strong spiritual and apostolic nature. From the '60s the "student" section of the Valdocco Oratory was considered a sort of seminary. Don Bosco himself writes in the *Memoirs of the Oratory* "We can say that our Oratory house for almost 20 years became the diocesan seminary".⁴ As Fr Braido writes, between 1861 and 1872 281 boys from the Oratory entered the Turin Seminary.'

How did Don Bosco carry out in practice this task of promoting vocations?

In the first place Don Bosco gave special attention to discovering the possible signs of a vocation in the boys with whom he came into contact when he went to preach in the churches in the various nearby villages, and in the boys gathered in the Valdocco Oratory. He noted that among the masses of his boys in some of them there began to emerge the suitable conditions for suggesting a possible vocation which until then were hidden under a covering of coarseness and ignorance. In fact, in these poor Oratory boys there was the combination of good behaviour and awakening intelligence; he therefore tried them out as leaders among their companions and on his part followed them with special attention. Because Don Bosco did not wait for an almost automatic development of a vocation, he knew from experience that youthful inconstancy can put it in serious danger. Therefore he actively collaborated with the gift of God creating a suitable environment, maintaining a spiritual atmosphere which responded to the requirements for the development of a vocation, and committing himself to being the support and guide of those whom he recognised as called by God to the priestly and religious life or to Salesian cooperation in the various ways this can be expressed.

⁴Memoirs of the Oratory. Trans. Daniel Lyons SDB. Don Bosco Publications, New Rochelle, New York 1989 p. 346. Putting his (new) private schools at the service of the dioceses as minor seminaries was a major contributing factor in the expansion of Salesian work, cf. A. J. LENTI, *Don Bosco. History and Spirit*. Vol. 5.Q: Institutional Expansion, Roma, LAS, 2009, pp. 49-73.

1. The first task for Don Bosco was that of creating an *atmosphere*, nowadays we would say a *culture*, in which the suggestion of a vocation could be welcomed positively and brought to maturity.

- An *atmosphere of familiarity* in which Don Bosco shared everything with the boys. He is with them in the playground, listening to them and creating an atmosphere of joy, of celebration and trust which opens their hearts and makes the boys feel as though they are in a family. The joy which emanated from Don Bosco's whole being when he was carrying out his self-sacrificing and enthusiastic apostolate was already in itself a vocational proposal. The boys in contact with Don Bosco on a daily basis had a great exhilarating experience of being and of really feeling themselves to be members of a family, learning to open their hearts and to look to the future with optimism and hope.
- This joyful and family atmosphere is nourished by a *strong spiritual experience*. The religious view of the world which Don Bosco had and which gave unity to all his many varied undertakings is almost spontaneously acquired by the boys who learn to live in the presence of God. A God who loves them and has for each of them a plan for their happiness and a full life. In the Oratory a spiritual atmosphere is created which leads to an interpersonal relationship with God and with one's brothers and permeates the whole of life. This atmosphere is nourished by a simple but constant form of sacramental and Marian piety. Prayer which leads the boys to a personal relationship of friendship with Jesus and Mary, and the appropriate sacramental experience which supports and stimulates growth in daily life, constitute the first resource in cultivating vocations and bringing them to maturity.
- A third characteristic of the atmosphere created by Don Bosco was the *apostolic dimension*. From the beginning Don Bosco involved the boys, in particular those who gave signs of a vocation, in assisting him in his work of education and catechesis. He entrusted to them some of their more mischievous companions so that making friends with them they could help them to feel at home and settle into the life of the Oratory positively. In this way the boys learned to work for the others with great commitment and total lack of self-interest. They also learned to make themselves more and more available and open to the demands of the apostolate, maturing in their own motivations and doing everything for the glory of God and the salvation of souls. With careful and constant accompaniment Don Bosco ensured that this apostolic service among their companions, lived with enthusiasm and readiness, while being effective in bringing along the right path those it was offered to, became also a practical "proposal" of life for these boys he had himself chosen. In this atmosphere, the Sodalities considered by Don Bosco a key element in the experience and the education provided in the Oratory. began and developed.

2. As well as the atmosphere, Don Bosco offers young people and adults, who are looking for guidance in their vocation, a faithful *spiritual accompaniment*. The natural place in which Don Bosco offers the help of spiritual direction is the confessional, but not only there: Don Bosco arranges for and in various ways facilitates the possibility of a meeting and a chat between the "sons of the family" and the "father", offering everyone a profound experience of education and of spiritual direction. He acts in various ways, and in a personal way adapted to the needs of the young people or the adults, aspirants to the ecclesiastical life, to religious life or simply to the life of a good Christian and upright citizen. Likewise he is particularly attentive in his activity of accompaniment with the Cooperators, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, Salesians, etc.

One of the more striking features one notices in watching Don Bosco acting as a spiritual director, is the discernment and the prudence he shows in giving advice about vocation. Even though in those days the Church lacked pastors and he himself had great need of collaborators, Don Rua testifies under oath, that "never did he advise anyone to enter (priestly or religious life) who did not have the necessary requisites... I am aware that he dissuaded various people in spite of their wishes".⁶

Always inspired by prudent discernment, he did what he could to lead those who, while having the necessary gifts, had never thought of becoming priests or religious to consider the possibility. Little by little Don Bosco put before them some ideas which could help them to re-think their choice of life and none of them ever regretted following his advice.

Don Bosco's spiritual direction was totally illuminated by "the gift of counsel" which enabled him to guide safely those who turned to him.

3. The intense work which Don Bosco undertook on behalf of vocations was sustained by an *intense love for the Church*: with total dedication, he devoted all his efforts to obtaining its good. It is precisely this love for the Church that enables us to understand the importance he gave to the apostolic activity of fostering vocations and his insistence that all should work together and devote themselves to obtaining for the Church the great treasure which vocations represent. Thus he used to say: "Whenever we procure a good vocation we are giving an inestimable treasure to the Church; it does not matter whether this vocation or this priest goes to the diocese, the foreign missions or a religious order. It is always a great gift that we give to the Church of Jesus Christ".¹ This view of the good of the whole Church never left him, not even when it engaged all his efforts, all his time, the financial means which cost him so much hard work, nor when it involved his limited personnel or his houses.

¹ *Summarium*, 676 par. 14.

"Run, run quick to save those boys...!" This appeal of the dying Don Bosco we can consider as addressed not only to those present at that moment in his room, but to the, whole Salesian Family in general. An appeal which is pressing and always will be, because the young people of all times are in need of "salvation".

The dying Don Bosco addresses this invitation also to us. It is an invitation to roll up our sleeves and to work hard so that around us a good number of sound Salesian vocations bud, flower and come to maturity, as they did around him. Taking up this invitation requires that each one of us renews the holy passion for the salvation of youth which Don Bosco himself had; this passion will give us courage and enable us to overcome the fear of not being understood or of being marginalised or rejected by this secularised and pagan world of ours, which rejects diversity, suppresses the supernatural and marginalises the believer.

Let us therefore fearlessly live a style of life which challenges this world and this society which does not allow the holistic development and promotion of the human person; a style of life which provides the stimulus for living out one's vocation with joy and enthusiasm and for proposing to young people and adults, men and women, boys and girls, the Salesian vocation as a suitable response of salvation to this world of today, and as a plan of life capable of making a positive contribution to the renewal of present day society. This is what article 28 of the Constitutions of the Salesians of Don Bosco has to say: "We are convinced that many young people are rich in spiritual potential and give indications of an apostolic vocation. We help them to discover, accept and develop the gift of a lay, consecrated or priestly vocation for the benefit of the whole Church and of the Salesian Family". This commitment had been one of the purposes of the Congregation even before its approval² and nowadays takes on an extraordinary urgency (cf. C. 6), as the Church repeatedly reminds us.

² BM XVII, p. 236. BM XVIII, p. 449.

2. A prior need: to create and develop a vocational culture"

"It is necessary, therefore, to promote a culture of vocation which will recognize and welcome this profound human aspiration, which brings a person to discover that Christ alone can tell him the truth about life".³ Speaking about a *culture of vocation*, as, for the first time John Paul II did, is nowadays not only pertinent, but also urgent. In fact we can see that sometimes there is a gap between what people are doing generously and well-intentioned and the collective mentality, between individual initiatives and society's actions, between the practice and its foundations. Thus in the Congregation, as in the Salesian Family, we see that there can be a certain amount of work for vocations by individuals, the so-called Delegates for vocations, but at the same time, in the communities or in the groups, one notices that a real culture of vocation does not exist.

³ Even though there is no article on minor seminaries in the first extant text of the Constitutions, Don Rua's manuscript of 1858, one was introduced by Don Bosco in the draft of 1860. Cf. G. Bosco, *Costituzioni della Società di S. Francesco di Sales [1858] — 1875*. Edizione critica di Francesco MOTTO, Roma, LAS, 1982, pp. 76-77.

⁴ For this section I draw freely on the article "Cultura della Vocazione", by Fr JUAN E. VECCHI, in *Dizionario della Pastorale Vocazionale*, Libreria Editrice Rogate, Roma 2002, pp. 370-382.

⁵ JOHN PAUL II, Message for the XXX World Day of Prayer for vocations (8 September 1992).

This culture in fact, requires not individual initiatives no matter how numerous, but a mindset and an attitude shared by a group; it is a question not only of private intentions and good resolutions, but the systematic and deliberate employment of the forces which the community has at its disposal. A

vocational culture, understood in this way operates in three areas: the anthropological, the educational and the pastoral. The first refers to the way in which being a human person is seen and presented as vocation; the second aims at fostering a appreciation of values conducive to vocation; the third pays attention to the relationship between vocation and the underlying culture and draws conclusions from this for vocation work.

Life is vocation

We know that underlying all educational and pastoral activities there is a particular view of mankind, one that is either spontaneous or the result of reflection. For the Christian it evolves in the course of life, with the mental effort to understand its significance and with the enlightenment provided by faith. The three elements - personal lived experience, a search for meaning and faith discernment - are indispensable and inter-connected. Revelation should not be understood as something external, superimposed on experience and on human understanding, but precisely as a revealing of its more profound and definitive significance. In the first place, therefore, it is necessary to overcome a way of thinking and speaking about vocation as though it were an *extra*, an incentive only for some, an aid to recruitment procedures for some states of life, rather than something fundamental to a person's fulfilment. The crisis of vocations in fact may also be due to the style of life they represent. But on a deeper level, it is due to a view of human life in which the aspect of the "call", that is to say of one's personal fulfilment depending on listening to another and conversing with him, is not only in fact excluded, but is not even taken seriously into consideration. This happens with those views of man's nature which put the satisfaction of an individual's needs before anything else, proposing personal self-fulfilment as the only goal in life or seeing freedom as mere autonomy. These views are very widespread nowadays having a certain attraction, and even when they are not fully subscribed to they are reflected in what is being communicated and influence some aspects of education.

A first task then of a vocational culture is to draw up and promote a view of human life seen as "a call and a response", which is the considered conclusion following a serious reflection on the nature of man. Leading to that conclusion will be the experience of relationships, the moral demands that flow from them, questions about the meaning of life. These then are the paths to be pursued in order to identify some of the factors of the vocational culture we are considering. People are conscious of their own individuality. They recognise that their life is unique, quite distinct from anyone else's and from the world itself. It belongs totally to them, but it does have the characteristics of a gift, something that precedes any desire or effort on their part.

Open to others and to God

At the same time, man is conscious of being part of a network of relationships, not optional nor secondary, among which that with other people is immediately evident and occupies a special place. The first thing a person notices is not his own EGO with its potentialities, but the inter-dependence with others who need to be accepted as they are and recognised in their dignity. From this point of view, acting responsibly is seen as an ability to recognise the signals which come from others and to respond to them. It is a moral issue because it involves the demands of responsibility and commitment. A man wakes up to his own personal existence when he stops seeing others merely as instruments to be made use of for his own benefit.

A vocational culture needs to lead a young person away from a subjective view of life which makes the individual the centre and the only criterion for self-assessment, which sees personal fulfilment in defending and seeking his own interests, rather than in openness and self-giving; and likewise from that view of interpersonal relationships as tied simply to pleasure-seeking without their moral dimension being perceived. The experiences of relationships and their moral element lead people towards the Transcendent, because in them is to be found something that is unconditional and immaterial. In fact, other people are not simply objects of passing acquaintance or things to which one reacts instinctively. It is necessary to recognise the mystery within them as persons, which implies respect, selflessness, love, the promotion of moral and spiritual values.

But this reference to transcendence becomes even more evident when people are able to face up to the fundamental questions about life and appreciate it. Then their openness to the Other, already perceptible in its positive aspects and in its limitations, becomes clearly apparent. They understand that they cannot stop at what is immediately perceptible nor be confined to the here and now. Individuals are an infinite mystery who only God can explain and only Christ can satisfy. Therefore they are naturally inclined to seek the meaning of life

and to find their place in history. Being faced with various alternatives they have to decide their own long term goals. You can't live your life twice over: you have to take the plunge! The real quality of life and salvation itself depend on the values pursued and on the choices made. Jesus puts it very clearly: "Whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and to forfeit his life?" (*Mk* 8,35-36). The task of a vocational culture is to encourage people to want to listen to such questions, to enable them to reflect deeply on them. The role of a vocational culture is also to help people to grow and to make the right choices regarding the *Bonum*, the *Verum*, and the *Pulchrum*, since it is in responding to and appreciating these that a person's full development consists.

Lived as a gift and as a task

All this requires a deeper reflection on vocation the name a person gives to his life when perceived as a gift and a call, conducted with responsibility and freely planned. The most fruitful source for discovering this foundation are the Scriptures, read as the revelation of the meaning of human life. In the Scriptures the nature and the significant relationships of human beings are defined by their condition as creatures, which does not imply inferiority or dependence, but God's gratuitous and creative love.

Man does not possess within himself the reason for his own existence nor his own fulfilment. He owes it to a gift, and he enjoys it when he makes himself responsible for it. The gift of life has within it a plan; this is gradually revealed as he reflects on it in the light of his own experience, of history, of God, and it requires a personal response. This determines a man's place in relation to the world and to all the things existing within it. These cannot satisfy his desires and so a man is not subjected to them.

A typical example of the way life is constructed is the covenant between God and his people as it is presented in the Bible. This is a gratuitous, freely-made choice on the part of God. Man has to recognise it and take it up as a plan of life, guided by the Word which challenges him and forces him to choose. In Christ, the truth about mankind which reason perceives vaguely and the Bible reveals, finds its complete manifestation. Christ, with his words but especially through the power of his human-divine existence, in which he shows his self-awareness as Son of God, opens a person up to the full comprehension of himself and of his destiny. In Christ we are made God's children and we are called to live as such in history.

The Christian vocation is not an optional extra in man's personal fulfilment. Rather it purely and simply complements it. It is the indispensable condition for authenticity and fullness, satisfying the deepest desires, those which flow from our essential nature as creatures. In the same way being a part of the building of

the Kingdom to which Jesus invites his disciples, is the only form of existence which corresponds with man's destiny in this world and in the next. In this way life is revealed completely as a gift, a call and a plan.

Taking all this as the basis and the inspiration for all activity, spreading it in such a way that it becomes the mindset of the educative pastoral community and especially of those involved in vocation ministry with the relevant practical educative consequences constitute this "culture" of which pastoral ministry has urgent need.

Here then are the fundamental attitudes which give life to a vocational culture and to which we want to give priority:

- ***The search for meaning.*** Meaning is closely related to an understanding of the immediate, the medium term and especially the ultimate purpose of events and things. It is also an intuition of the relationship which exists between reality and events and man and his well-being. Coming to an understanding of meaning implies the use of reason, an effort at investigation, a contemplative and interior attitude. It is gradually discovered in various contexts: in a person's own experience, in history, in the Word of God. Everything comes together in an acquisition of individual and community wisdom which is expressed in a trusting and hope-filled attitude to life. "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him" (*Rom*, 8,28).

It can take a long time to grasp the real meaning. It is important not to give up the search nor to be put off at the prospect of further and even more fruitful discoveries. Modern culture is the domain of

those who ignore, when they do not actually deny, any meaning which transcends immediate and subjective experience. This leads to an only-partial view of reality which makes a person incapable of coming to grips with the thousands of everyday events, of going beyond what is skin-deep or experienced by the senses. Cultural maturity implies a synthesis, a frame of reference that goes beyond one individual's knowledge so as to be able to look further and not remain imprisoned by events. The quality of life declines when it is not supported by a certain view of the world; and with the quality so too decline the reasons for committing oneself to the service of noble causes.

- **Openness to *transcendence***, to that beyond the human, to an acceptance of limitations, to welcoming mystery, welcoming the sacred in all its subjective and objective aspects, to reflection and to a religious approach.

This then is something which appears in everything that a person does until it becomes an essential element: in the use of intelligence, in the exercise of will, in seeking one's hearts' desires, in the nature of relationships, in the carrying out of enterprises. A person's life is open to the infinite and so too to the perception of reality. Nowadays there are some kinds of culture which, consciously or not, lead to an exclusive concentration on the "rational" and the temporal, and make it impossible to recognise one's life as mystery and as gift. Taking transcendence into account means accepting unanswered questions, going beyond the visible and the rational. Experiences, needs, immediate perceptions can be the starting points in an opening up to deeper values, demands and further truths even more demanding which are not seen as a denial of one's own impulses but rather as a way to freedom and their fulfilment. As Jesus said to the Samaritan woman: "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you «Give me a drink!» you would have asked him and he would have given you living water" (*Jn* 4,10).

- **An "*ethical*" mentality** capable of distinguishing between good and evil and of directing oneself towards the good. This culture is enlightened by a moral conscience, centred on values rather than on means, and assumes as its basic foundation the primacy of the person. Culture always has within it an ethical impulse and is in itself a moral value, because it seeks the human qualities of the individual and of the community. But human limitations can be an obstacle to this.

Some of its tendencies and achievements, and sometimes its whole system of values, are invested with moral ambiguity, both objective and subjective. This becomes a very serious matter when, in the evolution of the culture, ethical criteria are ignored or are subordinated to others. Every reference to good or evil is lost sight of, and other criteria are used such as utility, pleasure or power. Recently, a series of expressions have been coined which illustrate in a contrasting way the primacy or the total absence of any valid ethical criteria in the evolution of a culture: a culture of being or of having; of life or of death, of the individual or of things. Developing a culture with an ethical mindset will mean not allowing it simply to develop unchecked, but challenging its views and expressions with a conscience enlightened by faith so as to purify it and rescue it from ambiguity and move it forward in the direction of values.

- **A *planning* mentality.** Lack of concern about meaning often becomes indifference about the future. Without a sense of history there are no goals attractive enough to work for apart from those connected with personal self-interest. In former times ideologies, with their utopian overtones, were the driving force for social planning and this encouraged people to become personally involved in an historic project.

Nowadays there can be a sense of the future contracting and the present expanding, which leads to a culture of the immediate. Projects are implemented in the short-term and form part of a limited personal experience. Even beneficial projects can be limited to a desire to correct something, to a search for personal fulfilment, to a passing enthusiasm. Planning means organising resources and time according to the great pressing needs of history and the demands of the community in order to reach goals and ideals worthy of man. This requires a critical conscience in order to be on the watch for apparent imperatives, and the capacity to discern in order to reveal psychological pressures, self-motivated generosity so as to go beyond these immediate horizons.

- ***Commitment to solidarity***, as opposed to the culture which leads to a concentration on the individual. Generous personal projects can come to the fore only when people accept that their own personal fulfilment is linked to that of others. Solidarity is a widespread aspiration which is deeply embedded in consciences, at the heart of historical events and reveals itself in unusual and sometimes unexpected ways. It appears as a response to large-scale problems which are a cause for concern such as under-development, hunger, exploitation. It inspires practical initiatives such as aid plans, voluntary

service, public opinion which change the previous relationships between the individual and society. And all of this in circumstances near at hand and far afield. Consequently, it engages the spirit of service and motivates it.

But the culture of solidarity is often side-lined or weakened by strong economic and cultural currents. It presupposes a view of the world and of the individual person which considers interdependence as the key to interpreting the positive and negative phenomena of humanity. Nothing has its complete explanation, or a rational solution if considered in isolation. Poverty and wealth, hunger and waste are co-related phenomena. Between these contradictions what is involved is not only sympathy and compassion, but human responsibility. The individual person cannot be considered as someone who first of all exists in isolation and only at a second stage, is concerned with others. The individual can only be himself when accepting responsibility for the destiny of his fellows human beings in a spirit of solidarity.

3. Aspects which have a special significance in vocational animation and proposal

Promoting a vocational culture: the essential task of Youth Ministry

All ministry and in particular youth ministry, is at its roots vocational: the vocational dimension constitutes its main driving force and its natural culmination. Therefore it is necessary to give up any minimalist idea of vocation ministry, which only concerns itself with looking for candidates to religious or priestly life. On the contrary, as was said above, vocation ministry ought to create the suitable conditions so that every young person may discover, take up and follow in a responsible manner their own vocation.

The first condition, following the example of Don Bosco, consists in creating the circumstances in which a real "*vocational culture*" is lived and transmitted, that is to say, a way of understanding and facing up to life as a gift freely bestowed; a gift to be shared at the service of the fullness of life for everyone, overcoming a mindset which is individualistic, consumistic, relativistic, and the culture of self-fulfilment. Living this vocational culture demands making an effort to cultivate certain attitudes and values, such as the promotion and the defence of the sacred value of human life, confidence in your self and in your neighbour, an inner life which enables you to discover in yourself and in others the presence and the action of God, being ready to feel yourself responsible and to allow yourself to become involved for the benefit of others with an attitude of service and of giving freely, the courage to dream and to have desires on a large scale, solidarity and a sense of responsibility for others especially those most in need." Within this context or vocational culture youth ministry ought to propose to the young *the different vocational paths* - matrimony, religious or consecrated life, priestly service, social and ecclesial commitment -and accompany them in their process of discernment and choice.

12 Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Message for the XXX World Day of Prayer for vocations (8 September 1992).

Every educative-pastoral community needs to be aware of the characteristics of its own cultural surroundings and of the educative-pastoral activity it undertakes in its daily work with the young. All of this with the aim of promoting and developing the typical elements of a vocational culture, which is often not accepted in the surroundings in which the young people themselves are living.

Here I mention two things which could help in the development of a vocational culture:

- *Giving the educative-pastoral community a family atmosphere including significant vocational witnesses.* Young people are living in a standardised environment, in which they don't feel recognised or listened to; they have to earn or fight for everything, so that the weaker ones or the less prepared remain marginalised and forgotten. In this sort of environment it is almost impossible to live life as a gift to be shared; instead it appears to be a fight for survival or a race in order to win prosperity and personal fulfilment. In a typically Salesian family atmosphere young people feels freely accepted and appreciated; they have the experience of trusting relationships with significant adults; they feel involved in the life of .a group; they develop the ability to take the lead and to take responsibility; they learn to help to build the educative community and to feel co-responsible for the common good; they find room for moments of reflection, of dialogue and calm discussion. This is the best kind of environment for the development of a vocational

culture.

- *Ensuring guidance and accompaniment for people.*

In a standardised environment or one in which relationships are only functional, it will be very difficult to develop a vocational view of life. In fact, such a process requires the presence and the closeness of educators among the young, especially in the more spontaneous and informal moments; familiarity with and interest in their lives; the capacity for personal relationships; moments of conversation and reflection together which help them to see life from a positive and vocational point of view; space and time for more organised meetings for personal accompaniment.

Education to love, to chastity

In vocational guidance and direction education to love has a very important role. It is necessary to help the adolescents to integrate their affective-sexual development with the educational process and also with the process of education to the faith. And this so that they can live their affectivity and sexuality in harmony with the other fundamental dimensions of their personality, maintaining attitudes of openness, service and self-giving.

Nowadays adolescents have to cope with a cultural and social climate which is highly sexualised and which continuously sends out its messages in the street, on television, in cyberspace. It is a question of suggestions which encourage a consumeristic form of sexual behaviour and advocate immediate satisfaction in the pursuit of pleasure. Permissiveness is the dominant social feature in this area, and the sexual appetite sadly becomes commercialised. It all gives rise to confusion with regard to values and to great moral relativism. It often happens that a premature practice of sexual relationships in the course of friendship is advocated or the satisfaction of simple compulsive pleasure seeking. Young people place great store on love, often challenging prejudice and criticism, anxious to respond to their own affective needs, sensitive to the value of a relationship which is open and unlimited. But very often in this area they do not have any guidance nor anyone to help them to understand their own affectivity and sexuality according to an holistic view of the person, presenting in a continuous and clear way a plan for education in love which might guide them towards the formation of their personality which is harmonious and makes it possible to see life as a gift and as service.

Already several years ago the GC23 pointed out to the Salesians that education to love was one of the three important key issues around which the synthesis faith-life becomes possible and is put into effect. "It is not a matter of particular points, but rather of areas where the significance, strength and contrasts of faith can be found".

Nowadays this is even more important especially when one wants to develop in an effective manner the vocational dimension of life and to create an atmosphere in which it is possible for a young person to bring a vocational plan to maturity, especially when it is a question of vocations of a particular commitment, which often include the choice of celibacy. In fact many young people find themselves in an atmosphere which is of little help for an integral and positive view of love. Many of them are living with considerably difficult problems which the educator needs to know in order to help them to overcome them.

For many of them there is a lack of any experience of selfless love in their family, in which they have to cope with tensions and conflict between their parents which not infrequently leads them to opt for separation or divorce. The friendly relationship they may experience among themselves is superficial, and the result of all this is that instead of resisting the temptations presented by their environment they are overcome by them. In this way, very quickly, some of them form a close relationship with each other as a couple which cuts them off from the others and from the life of the group. The need they feel to have a full relationship with their partner leads them to disordered sexual practices. Certainly in all of this one sees the effects of a lack of any real education to love: either the subject is avoided or it is treated in a moralistic and negative way, which instead of being a help is rejected by adolescents.

13 Cf. GC23, 181.

Our Preventive System and the family spirit, a characteristic feature of our centres, can create the conditions for happily putting it into practice."

Education to prayer

Prayer is an essential and primary element in guidance and in the choice of a vocation, since this gift of God freely offered to man can be discovered and followed only with the help of grace. Therefore an effective and profound vocation ministry for the young is not possible without introducing them to and accompanying them in the assiduous practice of prayer.

The first Christian community was waiting in prayer on the day of Pentecost, the day of the birth of the evangelising Church (*Acts* 1,14). Jesus himself prayed before choosing the apostles (*Lk* 6, 12ss) and taught them to pray so that the Kingdom of God might come (*Mt* 6,7ss). The command "Pray therefore the Lord of the harvest that he may send labourers into his harvest" (cf. *Mt* 9,37ss; *Lk* 10,2) is understood in all its weight and urgency in the light of the example and the teaching of Christ. Prayer is the best path to follow and the best form of vocation ministry.

Considering this centrality of prayer in the faith journey it is important to help the young and introduce them to and initiate them into a really deep life of prayer: only in this way will they be able to bring to maturity a possible vocation in them of special consecration."

Young people nowadays are often living in an environment which hardly favours the spiritual life. They are immersed in a culture of consumerism and profit, of personal enjoyment and the immediate satisfaction of desires; the superficial view of life is dominated by subjective ethical-moral criteria, very often in contrast with each other and even contradictory. The environment in which they move fosters a agitated rhythm of life, in which they have a great variety of experiences without being able to really savour any of them. "The crisis of the family, a widespread relativist and consumerist mentality, the negative influence of *media* on consciences and behaviour are a strong obstacle to a vocational culture". 16

" A simple, but still relevant, programme for education to chastity was proposed by the 23 General Chapter: cf. GC23, 195-202.

"Fostering consecrated vocations demands certain fundamental choices: constant prayer... We should be committed to daily prayer in our communities and involve young people, families, lay people, Salesian Family groups" (GC26, 54).

On the other hand, we do find in adolescents and young people a search for an inner life, an effort to discover their own identity and an openness to and real seeking after an experience of the Transcendent. Even though, often, this process is perceived in a subjective light and as corresponding to their own needs, it has to be said that it is a good opportunity to help them to discover the God of Jesus. Groups and movements are on the increase which, in very different ways, promote experiences of spirituality, and young people are present in large numbers in these groups. Just think for example of the Taize community!

All this constitutes a favourable situation in which to offer young people the possibility of beginning an educational process towards an inner spiritual life which gradually leads them to discover and to savour Christian prayer, especially that which gives it its unique nature and makes it so precious: the meeting with the person of Jesus who reveals to us the love of God, who invites us to and offers us the grace of a personal relationship with Him. This is why in a world so imbued with secularism and superficiality, there is an urgent need to promote this education to an inner life and to offer our young people a strong and profound spiritual life. "Today the times demand a more explicit return to prayer... It is a kind of prayer which is in harmony with the reawakening of faith; to be committed believers and not just people of habit, implies a dialogue with the Lord which is more explicit, more frequent and more intense. In an atmosphere of secularism a pressing need is felt for meditation and a deepening of faith". 17

" GC26, 67.

Education to prayer ought to foster the conditions which lead young people to become true to themselves. These are: silence, reflection, the ability to interpret one's own life, a readiness to listen and to contemplate, gratuity and trust. Young people who live agitated lives full of activities will not easily succeed in creating within themselves the silence in which to cultivate an inner life which leads them to a real meeting with themselves. This too should be one of the aims we try to achieve. Hence the importance of beginning prayer moments with a short period of calm, of silence, of serenity, which will allow our young people to become conscious of themselves, and starting from this experience, to accept their own lives and to place them before the Lord.

At the heart of Christian prayer is listening to the Word of God. This ought to be the great teacher of Christian prayer, which does not consist so much in "speaking" to God as rather in "listening to Him" and

opening oneself to His will (cf. *Lk* 11,5-8; *Mt* 6,9ss). "In your groups, dear young people", John Paul II wrote, "multiply the occasions for hearing and studying the word of the Lord, especially through the *lectio divina*. You will discover the secrets of the Heart of God and will derive profit for discerning situations and transforming reality".¹ Normally the young person needs to be initiated into this process of listening, helped to understand the meaning of the Word as it is heard or read. It also needs to be recognised that the Word of God is effective in itself and therefore it will sometimes be necessary to allow it to act on its own in the heart of the young person without forcing it too much with our own schemes: very often it will itself guide them to a personal dialogue with Jesus.

¹ EGIDIO VIGANO, "Our prayer for vocations", AGC 341 (1992) p. 27.

² JOHN PAUL II, Message on the occasion of the XII World Youth Day (15 August 1996).

Another great school of prayers is the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church: the young person needs to be helped to take part in these more and more consciously, understanding the signs and the symbols of the liturgy. An education to the faith which forgets or neglects the *sacramental encounter* of the young with Christ, is not the way to find him and even less will it indicate the possibility of following him. "Like us the young find the Lord in the ecclesial community. However, in its life there are moments in which he reveals himself and communicates himself in a singular way: these are the sacraments, in particular of Reconciliation and the Eucharist. Without the experience to be found in them, knowledge of Jesus becomes inadequate and limited, even to the point of not being able to recognise him among men as the Risen Saviour... Rightly is it said that the sacraments are the true memorial of Jesus: of what he did and still does today for us, of what he means for our life; rekindling therefore our faith in him, so that we see see him better in our life and in events.

They are also the revelation of what seems hidden in the recesses of our life, through which we become aware of them... In the sacrament of Reconciliation we open our eyes and we see what we can become according to God's plan and will; we receive the Spirit which purifies and renews us. It is said that it is the sacrament of our future as sons, rather than of our past as sinners. In the Eucharist Christ incorporates us in his offering to the Father and strengthens our gift of ourselves to our fellow men. It inspires in us the desire and it gives us the hope that both the love for the Father and love for our brothers and sisters may become a grace for everyone and in everything: we announce his death, we proclaim his resurrection, come Lord Jesus".

³ JUAN E. VECCHI, "Lo riconobbero nello spezzare il pane", NPG 1997, n. 8 (novembre) pp. 3-4.

Among the many forms of initiation into prayer, Salesian Youth Spirituality offers us its own precious contribution and a specific style of spiritual life, with a characteristic style of prayer and a way of organising life around some insights of faith, value options and attitudes. In it are to be found certain characteristics that belong to Salesian prayer: it is prayer which is simple without unnecessary complications, part of everyday life, which is presented and offered to the Lord; a prayer full of hope, which fosters a paschal view of life, in personal conversation with the Risen Lord, alive and present among us; prayer which leads on to the celebration of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist in which one has a personal encounter with Jesus; prayer which helps us to discover the presence of Jesus in every young person, especially in the poorest ones, and leads us to commit ourselves to education and evangelisation.

It is important, therefore to give particular attention to these characteristics in our process of educating to prayer, helping the young to live them and in this way introducing them to Salesian Youth Spirituality: It is a way of Christian life which can lead even adolescents and youngsters to the great goal of holiness."

We need to be certain about this: only with a life of prayer which is more and more centred on Christ will young people be able to clarify and consolidate their choice of vocation, particularly if it is a question of a vocation of special consecration.

Personal accompaniment

Another fundamental element in vocation ministry is the regular personal accompaniment of the young person. It ought to be respectful, taking due account of the maturity and the spiritual progress of the person being accompanied. It is a form of accompaniment which helps people to absorb and make

their own the experiences they have had and the suggestions they are given; it encourages and guides them in an introduction to personal prayer and to the celebration of the sacraments; it directs them towards a personal plan of life as a practical means of discernment and vocational maturing. The grace of the Spirit Who is working in the hearts of people needs the collaboration of the community and of a spiritual director. For this reason at the side of every saint there is a spiritual director who accompanies and guides him.

" Cf. GC23, 158ss and particularly 173-177.

Accompaniment is even more important within the Salesian educational system, which is based on the presence of the educator among the young and on a personal relationship based on them knowing each other, on understanding and trust.

When we speak about accompaniment, we are not referring only to a one-to-one dialogue, but to a whole *variety of personal relationships* which help the young person to assimilate the values and experiences lived personally, to relate the general suggestions to his own concrete situation, to clarify and deepen motivations and criteria.

This process includes the Salesian community providing *experiences at progressive levels* to ensure that there is a educative environment, capable of fostering the personal approach and vocational development. By way of example:

- a presence among the young, with the willingness to get to know them and share life with them with a trusting attitude;
- encouraging groups, in which the young are given the support of the leaders and of their own companions;
- brief, occasional contacts which show an interest in the young people and their world; and at the same time, a readiness to provide instruction at certain times of special significance for the young person;
- moments of personal conversation short, frequent, systematic, according to a practical plan;
- contact with the Salesian community, with the experience of sharing their life of prayer, fraternity and apostolate;
- the frequent offer of the sacrament of reconciliation; in which the attentive and friendly observations of the confessor often prove decisive in guiding people to their vocational option.

In the practice of accompaniment, especially in personal dialogue, it would be well to ensure that attention is paid to *some fundamental points* for the human and Christian development of the young person and to discerning the signs of a vocation. In particular, here are some of these:

- *Educating to self-knowledge*, in order to discover the values and the qualities which the Lord has given to each one, but also the limitations and the compromises in one's way of living and thinking. How many young people have not responded to the call of a vocation, not because they were lacking in generosity or were indifferent, but simply because they were not helped to know themselves and to discover the ambiguous and unchristian roots of certain mental and affective patterns, or because they were not helped to free themselves from their fears and self-defence in the face of the vocation itself.
- *Bringing to maturity the recognition of Jesus as the Risen Lord and as the ultimate meaning* of their life. Vocational motivations need to be based on the recognition of the initiative of God who loved us first. As Pope Benedict VI explained to the young people of Rome and Lazio: "The Lord is ever present and looks at each one of us with love. Except that we have to find this gaze and to encounter him. How can we do this? I would say that the first point for an encounter with Jesus, for an experience of his love, is getting to know him... To know a person, above all the great person of Jesus, God and Man, also requires reason, but, at the same time the heart. Only by opening our heart to him, only by knowing all that he said and did, can we, with our love, our moving toward him, gradually get to know him a little better and thus also experience being loved. ...In a true conversation we are increasingly able to find this way of knowledge which becomes love. Naturally it is not only thinking, not only prayer, but also doing that is part of the journey to Jesus: doing good things, taking trouble for our neighbour".²¹

- *Educating to interpret the experience of one's own life and historical events as a gift of God as being called to place oneself at the disposal of the mission for the Kingdom of God.* For this purpose to help the young to throw light on their lives through the Word of God, with constant reference to Jesus Christ, felt as the Lord of life who proposes a particular plan for each one of us. "My life has been willed by God since eternity. I am loved, I am necessary. God has a plan for me in the totality of history: he has a plan specifically for me. My life is important and also necessary. Eternal love created me in depth and awaits me. So this is the first point: to know, to seek to know God and thus to understand that life is a gift, that it is good to be alive. Then the essential is love. To love this God who has created me, who has created this world, who governs among all the difficulties of man and of history and who accompanies me. It means loving my neighbour... Hence there is a fundamental will of God for us all, which is identical for us all. However its application is different in every life, for God has a specific project for each person... not to "possess" life but to make life a gift, not to seek for myself but to give to others. This is the essential".
- *Deepening the personal assimilation of the evangelical values as the permanent criteria which guide them in the choices which are made in daily life.* In this way it will be easier to resist the temptation to conform in following the crowd. As I said earlier, one aspect to which we will need to pay special attention in this area is education to love and to affectivity.

" BENEDICT XVI, Meeting with the young of Rome and Lazio, Feast of the Annunciation (25.03.2010). 82 *Ibid.*

The centrality and the role of religious consecration in the mission of the Salesian Family

The Salesian mission is an educative mission (the holistic development of the individual) and the mission of the evangelisation of the young. These two dimensions of our Salesian mission (the educative and the evangelising) are essential, and need to exist together mutually complementing and enriching each other.

The Salesian Family, while respecting the charism of the different groups of which it is composed, is the subject of the mission and needs to ensure that this organic unity is preserved intact; on this account it is a great benefit that in it there is a significant presence of the two complementary forms of living the vocation, the secular one and the consecrated, and in this latter the lay and the priestly form.

But it is essential to recognise and to emphasise the *fundamental value of consecrated life* in the carrying out of the Salesian mission. "Don Bosco" - GC24 declares - "wanted consecrated persons at the centre of his work, persons oriented to the young and their holiness".

The lay form of the Salesian vocation, in its various expressions within the Salesian Family, recalls the values of creation and of the secular state, it is particularly sensitive to the world of work, pays special attention to the local situation, underlines the need for a professional approach; the lay condition of the members of the Salesian Family, religious, consecrated or not, shows everyone how, through these values and secular occupations, to live a total dedication to God for the sake of the Kingdom. The other form is that of the priesthood, which recalls the ultimate purpose of all educative activity; the priests belonging to the different groups of the Salesian Family exercise a priesthood fully involved in a commitment to education: offering the Word of God not only in catechesis, but also in their educational personal contact and activity, they build up the Christian community while building up the educative community.

" GC24, 150.

The value of religious consecration needs to be rediscovered in the Salesian Family. In fact it is a necessary sign, which, while it specifies the identity of those who have made a total choice in the following of Jesus, at the same time indicates to the lay people who share our charism, that their contribution to the mission is not simply an extra help, but rather a particular experience of God, in the sharing of the same spirituality and of the same mission. "There is no future for a religious who does not express immediately, and almost emotionally, a transcendent dimension - like an arrow pointed to the divine and to love of his neighbour, which stems from the divine".

Not infrequently, in our view of the Salesian vocation and in our presentation of it, we give the impression of emphasising the functional aspects leaving to one side or taking for granted as though clearly understood those belonging to consecrated life. "If we are going to put religious consecration in parentheses, so as to

argue in terms of roles and actions, this not only changes the terms of reference but completely alters the dimensions".

In its specific role the Salesian Family *is enriched by the significant and complementary presence of priests, religious, consecrated and laity*. Together they form an unusually strong combination of forces engaged in witnessing and in the educative mission; the various different lay vocations enrich the witness value of consecrated life with its animating function which, as such, it has to carry out in the Salesian Family and Movement.

This relationship therefore is not based on the roles or on the different functions which each one may have, (very often these roles are the same), but on the specific vocational gifts through which each one makes a contribution to the common mission. The fact of dedicating one's life ought to be identical because it is total, not, however, the way of dedicating it.

24 JUAN E. VECCHI, *The Beatification of Brother Artemide Zatti: A sensational precedent*, AGC 376 (2001) p. 44.
" *Ibid*, p. 43.

The Salesian Youth Movement a special place for vocations

The Salesian Youth Movement (SYM) is an organisation full of life and to be found in the five continents. It is a very significant expression of the strong attraction which Don Bosco and his charism have for the young. In various national and international meetings of the SYM there has been a lively and strong experience of a flowing current of communion which has its source in the person of Don Bosco, in the values of his pedagogy and in Salesian Youth Spirituality.

This development of the SYM with its variety of groups and associations, with the presence of a good number of leaders, the diversity of the initiatives and formation programmes, for us members of the Salesian Family is a grace from God, and at the same time a call. The Lord is sending us all these young people so that we may help them along the path of growth as individual persons so as to reach the fulness of the Christian life.

A tendency to gather people together, the life of a group, the inspirational value of community was an almost spontaneous experience in Don Bosco's life. He had a natural inclination to be sociable - for friendship. Gathering young people together therefore is an indispensable part of the educational approach Don Bosco wanted. Through a large variety of youth groups and associations we have the opportunity of ensuring a high quality educational presence in the new places where the young socialise. This experience becomes significant when the young people are called upon to appreciate the existence of the living Church and to commit themselves to it as living members of the "body" of the Christian community.

Sometimes it can seem that the young people in our centres and in some of our groups are superficial, especially when they are in their noisy and festive mode. In reality many of them are profoundly good and spiritual. They demonstrate a great thirst for God, for Christ, for the Gospel lived in the simplicity and the normality of daily life. Don Bosco was convinced that a high proportion of the young people that God sends to our houses have the right dispositions, if they are properly motivated and accompanied, to follow a vocation of special commitment." Precisely because they are often living in an atmosphere which is little conducive to silence and to an inner life, they look to us for help, for our support and our accompaniment on the path of bringing their life to maturity. Salesian Youth Spirituality, the style of Christian life lived by Don Bosco and the boys at the Oratory in Valdocco, constitutes then a treasure to offer these young people.

In a good number of places in the world many vocations to religious and priestly life and also to a committed lay life in the Salesian Family are flourishing in the groups and in the associations of the SYM, especially among the leaders. It is something we have to take account of, appreciating and accompanying this group experience in a much better way. Perhaps we need to be more convinced that our young people, especially the young leaders, have the right to receive from us a stimulus which leads them to see their lives and their commitment in a vocational key; in their personal accompaniment we need to propose very clearly the question of vocation and encourage in them a generous response.

This is an important and urgent task for every Salesian and for every member of the Salesian Family in their daily contact with the young people in the groups and in their various leadership roles. When there is a suitable moment and when the young person is potentially receptive that is the time to suggest a vocational

commitment. In making this suggestion we have to be free and courageous, entrusting ourselves to the action of the Spirit, Who will often surprise us with what He does.

" Cf. BM XI, p. 248.

Nowadays the age for making a decision about vocational life-options is changing, and even though the seed is planted in pre-adolescence or adolescence, often it is maturing later, when the young people are at university or having their first experience of work. It is important to provide opportunities and situations in which we are able to accompany them in these moments which are decisive for their future. Among these young people we need to give special care to those who are closer to us, the leaders, the volunteers, those working with us in our centres, generously sharing many of the aspects of the Salesian mission, who have a genuine desire to serve and are looking for a meaningful plan of life. It is necessary to ensure that the experience of leadership and of voluntary service helps them to organise their lives according to a line of enquiry and an openness to vocation.

We notice how among the groups of the SYM, *voluntary service* groups are developing in a wonderful way. These constitute a first step in the formation process previously carried out in the groups. Young people in opting for voluntary service, discover an opportunity for initiative and service which becomes a courageous challenge to the individualistic and consumeristic mentality which pervades much of society. At the same time, it helps them to bring to maturity a vocational view of life as a gift and as service.

This "sign of the times" needs to be welcomed and the many openings it provides exploited, especially in the education to solidarity and the vocational opportunities included in it.

Don Bosco knew how to involve his boys, often very young, in forms of voluntary service which were quite heroic. Just to recall the young "volunteers" at the time of the cholera epidemic in Turin. By means of these responsibilities in service he helped them bring to maturity a vocational option for life. The direct involvement of these same boys in their own education and in the transformation of the environment was for Don Bosco one of the fundamental keys of his educational system, in addition to its being a real school of citizenship and of holiness.

And we too today, through voluntary service, want to re-propose a vocational view of life inspired by the Gospel lived according to Salesian Youth Spirituality. The volunteers make a reality of these values and this attitude characteristic of a "vocational culture" as mentioned before, such as the defence and the promotion of the sacred value of human life, confidence in themselves and in their companions, an inner life which enables them to discover in themselves and in others the presence and the action of God, being ready to feel themselves responsible and to allow themselves to become involved for the benefit of others with an attitude of service and of free self-giving. These values need to be cultivated during the formation of the volunteers and should inspire their plans and their way of giving service in such a way that their experience of voluntary service shapes their lives as citizens and as committed Christians and is not merely limited to one experience among many during their youthful years.

In this way voluntary service becomes a real school of life; it contributes to educating the young to a culture of solidarity in relation to others, especially those most in need. It helps them to develop a spirit of welcoming, of openness towards others, and quite naturally leads to an openness to the total and free gift of themselves.

It is important, therefore, to promote voluntary service in the Salesian Family. It is an option that should be made known, appreciated and accompanied. In itself it is a typical experience in which a vocational culture can be appropriately cultivated.

4. Conclusion. The beauty and relevance of the Salesian vocation

On my visits to the Congregation and to the other groups of the Salesian Family present in various places I have been able to observe the enormous force of attraction and the enthusiasm aroused by Don Bosco, among both the young and adults, among the ordinary people and also among the authorities, the politicians, social workers, in the different cultures and also among people of other religions. Speaking with many of them I have been able to appreciate the gratitude they show for the presence and the work of Salesians. They are all proud to be past-pupils and to have experienced the Salesian method of education. Often the memory of Don Bosco produced great enthusiasm among the people and mobilised whole populations. This happens,

for example, in Panama during the novena and the feast of Don Bosco. We are seeing the same phenomenon during the travels of the casket of Don Bosco, which is going the rounds of the various continents. His teaching method and style of education, especially when it is known and studied, is considered a treasure which needs to be both known and preserved. In fact it represents a very suitable response to the challenges and to the expectations of today's young people.

All this encourages us to live our vocation with justified pride and gratitude, as we feel ourselves to be the heirs and the continuers of a special charism which God raised up for the young especially the poor and those at risk. In these 150 years of Salesian history, starting from the founding of the Congregation and of the Salesian Family, we see Don Bosco's dream fulfilled, of involving a vast movement of people who sharing his spirit, commit themselves to the mission for youth. We are all part and a proof of this dream as it unfolds.

We therefore need to live our Salesian vocation with a great sense of gratitude. And the first sign of our thanks is our own fidelity lived with joy and shining witness. We need to speak about our vocation. We need to speak about Don Bosco and his mission.

We need to point out what the Salesian Family, through its groups, has achieved in the world and to encourage many people of good will to offer not only their collaboration but their very lives so that the Salesian mission on behalf of the young so loved by God may continue in the world.

All of us have known and can remember brothers and sisters, communities and groups who have lived and are still living their vocation in an admirable and attractive way. Their lives attract the esteem and the co-involvement of many people. I am just thinking now of Fr Cimatti who with his pleasant kindness and his musical talent made Don Bosco and his work known and appreciated in Japan, raising up numerous vocations; or Fr Carrell() who in India, together with other great missionaries, made the Salesian vocation known and loved, involving large numbers of young people and setting in motion a vocational movement the abundant fruits of which we are still gathering today. I also remember Blessed Sister Maria Romero, a tireless apostolic woman in Costa Rica, or the shining figure of Sister Eusebia Palomino, or the Salesian Cooperator Attilio Giordani, or the Past Pupil Alberto Marvelli, or Alexandrina da Costa, or Nino Baglieri.

Even in the most difficult situations such as those in communist countries, the members of the Salesian Family did not allow themselves to be frightened or discouraged by the obstacles, and they did not retire, waiting for better times, but tried to live their vocation with fidelity, helping one another to persevere in almost impossible situations and giving rise to new and creative ways in order to carry out in a clandestine manner pastoral work according to the Salesian spirit. In this way too, in such adverse circumstances, they were able to foster numerous vocations to religious life and to the Salesian Family.

I am sure that each one of you in the various groups and in the Congregations and the Institutes of the Salesian Family, has known brothers and sisters around whom numerous vocations to religious life have developed. Others will have promoted the commitment to Don Bosco's mission among many lay people. This kind of power of inspiration has its source in the person of our great Father Don Bosco. Today too, whenever our lay coworkers know Don Bosco well, with his Educational System and his Spirituality, they become really enthusiastic about him and they feel the desire to make him known to others.

Therefore we ought to be proud of our Salesian vocation; to know Don Bosco better and better, and above all to live and communicate with enthusiasm his spirit and the Salesian mission. As a sign of gratitude for the gift of the Salesian vocation we have received, we commit ourselves to making it known to all, especially to the young. We will speak about it whenever it is possible, to our co-workers and to the friends who come in contact with us. Our life, our enthusiasm, our fidelity will clearly show that we believe in the beauty and the value of the vocation we have received. We believe in its relevance, and we live it with intensity in order to respond joyfully to the needs and to the expectations of the young and of society today.

The Lord Jesus and Mary Help of Christians have entrusted to us this precious gift for the salvation of the young. It is a gift we guard with love, we live intensely, we communicate with joy.

As usual I conclude with a fable which, it seems to me, will provide plenty of stimulus for the reflection which we want to make on the theme of the *sequela*, the journey, the fundamental life-option, and the Lord as the only and highest good, and the truly precious pearl for which it is worth-while selling

everything. They are all aspects which are concerned with the idea of life as a vocation.

THE CARAVAN IN THE DESERT

In the Far East there used to live a rich and powerful Emperor. In all the courts of the world they used to sing the praises of his kingdom, of his palaces, of his wisdom. But the bards and minstrels who travelled from castle to castle sang above all of his immense wealth.

«The jewels alone in his diadem could support a city!» they used to declaim.

As always happens, all of this provoked the envy and the greed of other kings and other peoples. Some tribes of fierce and violent barbarians gathered on the frontier and invaded the kingdom. No one succeeded in stopping them.

The Emperor decided to find refuge among the faithful tribes who were living in the mountains, beyond the terrible desert.

One night he left the imperial palace accompanied by a small caravan which carried his fabulous treasure of gold bars, jewels and precious stones. To hasten his march, he was accompanied only by select guards and his pages who had sworn their absolute fidelity even to death.

The track across the desert snaked between sand dunes scorched by the sun, narrow passage ways and steep inclines. A track known only to a few.

Half way along the journey, while they were climbing up an icy slope, exhausted by fatigue and the slippery surface of the rocks, some of the camels in the caravan collapsed gasping for breath and did not rise again.

The strong boxes they were carrying rolled down the sides of the dune, turned over and scattered all their contents of coins, jewels and precious stones which slipped down among the rocks and the sand.

The Sovereign was unable to slow down. The enemy was probably already aware of his flight.

With a gesture which was both a sign of displeasure and of generosity, he invited his pages and the guards to pick up what precious stones they could manage to gather together and to take them with them. A handful of those precious objects would make them rich for the rest of their lives.

While the young men eagerly threw themselves on the precious spoils, and scrambled anxiously in the sand and among the stones, the sovereign continued his journey through the desert.

However, he became aware that someone was continuing to walk behind him.

He turned round and saw that it was one of his pages, who was following him panting and perspiring.

«And you», he asked, «didn't you stop to collect anything?».

The young man looked at him calmly with a gaze full of dignity and pride, and replied:

«No, sire. I follow my king».

The story reminds us of that decisive passage in John's Gospel, which is a watershed in the story of Jesus:

«Many of the disciples of Jesus left him and stopped going with him. Then Jesus said to the Twelve: "Do you want to go away too?"

Simon Peter answered: "Lord, who shall we go to? You have the message of eternal life and we believe; we know that you are the Holy One of God", (Jn 6,66-69).

Such a demanding decision to commit one's life into the hands of God is only possible if, Madeleine Delbrel writes, we are able to dance allowing the Holy Spirit to guide us.

The Dance of Life

"To be a good dancer, with You as with others, it is not necessary to know where the dance is leading. It is enough to follow the steps, to be happy, to be light-footed and above all not to be stiff. You don't have to seek explanations about the steps you like to take. It is enough to be the extension, light and alive, of You, and to receive from You the transmission of the rhythm of the orchestra. It is necessary not to want to make progress at all costs, but to accept that you turn round, progress side by side. It is necessary to know to stop, to slide rather than to walk. And these would only be the steps of a fool were the music not to turn into harmony. We however forget the music of Your Spirit, and we make life a gymnastic exercise; we forget that in Your arms life is a dance and that Your holy will is a fantasy.

If only we could be content with You, Lord, we would never be able to resist the need to dance which is spreading through the world, and we would come to realise what dance You like us to dance, espousing the steps of Your Providence".

Dear brothers and sisters, I pray that all of you may have this exhilarating experience of allowing yourselves to be led by the Spirit. Our life will be full of joy and of enthusiasm, and then we shall be able to become, like John the Baptist, teachers who know how to help their disciples to become disciples and apostles of the Lord Jesus.

With my very best wishes, and may you have a peaceful 2011 rich in vocations for the whole Salesian Family.

Pascual Chavez Villanueva
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